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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 004435

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CHARGE VISITS CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

REF: DHAKA 01558

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Judith Chammas, Reason(s): 1.4 (b)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: From August 23 to 25, Charge D'Affaires visited the Chittagong Hill Tracts with poloff (notetaker) and interviewed government, military, journalists and representatives from civic action groups. CDA distributed book bags with Bangla-English dictionaries, school supplies, and a well known photographic book America 24/7 to several grade schools, briefly described school life in America and answered questions from the children. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) CDA met with Wadud Bhuiyan, BNP MP for the Chittagong Hill Tracts Khagrachari district, and Chairman of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board. Accompanying Charge in this meeting and others were poloff (notetaker) and A/RSO. Bhuiyan told Charge that 80 percent of the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Accords have been implemented, blamed former rebel leader Shantu Larma for Hill Tract insecurity, saying that he was still involved in extortion and kidnapping, and that progress on the 1997 Peace Accords takes time. He said that the Peace Accords seem to cause more divisions within the residents of the Hill Tracts and that all sides seem to think they have lost out. All, he said, are "not satisfied."

13. (C) Commenting on the security situation, Bhuyian said that the Army ensured the safety of everyone, that "if the Army was not here, it would not be safe for anyone including Shantu Larma." When asked whether international monitors might reduce charges that the Army is committing abuses towards indigenous people, he responded that "our Army is enough" and that they have not "taken sides."

14. (C) Bhuiyan said his role in the CHT was to create an environment suitable for the "giving up of arms," but his mediation is not acceptable to Shantu Larma who, according to Bhuiyan, "feels sidetracked and ignored."

15. (C) In a meeting later that day, Army brigade commander Brigadier General Shabbir ul-Karim told Charge that "we are here to assist the civilian authorities" but that one can not expect progress to happen overnight. He admitted that certain issues were still unfulfilled. For example, he said that two important ministries, forestry and transport, have not been transferred to local authority as stipulated in the 1997 Accords, and said that administration could be improved if civilian government workers were given instructions on local Hill Tract customs. Nonetheless, he said, things have improved since the Accords, and cited numerous examples: political parties have increased, freedom of speech has improved, there is more travel along the roads, and more transportation to and from the plains.

16. (C) When asked about further UN and NGO development efforts, he said that development will come and "no one will stop it" but to ensure development work, there must be law and order, but for now, the police don't have respect for the local people," while "the Army people have respect." When asked about the Army training the local police, he responded that they do not train the police, but with 10,000 men in his brigade, he takes the police with the Army on patrols, and leads by example. Without the Army, he said, "the 13 tribal groups would be fighting amongst themselves" with their inter-tribal power struggles. Besides, we have helped them by building schools and roads, he said.

17. (C) In another meeting with the Army, Charge met with Brigadier General Asraf Abdullah Yusuf, Commander of a Brigade based in Rangamati. Yusuf said that he had only been in the CHT for five months but had been here three times over his career. He commanded 8-9,000 men in four battalions. He insisted that he and Army do not want to be in the Hill Tracts owing to malaria, and they are only here to aid the civil powers, as the Army can go to places the civil government can not. When asked whether he has a civilian liaison unit, he said that his intelligence chief functioned in that capacity. Pressed further on how he communicates with the various NGOS, UNDP, or civilian groups, he explained that he functioned in that capacity, but has no unit dedicated to civilian military communication.

8, (C) When questioned about security in the CHT, he said that there are people from the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), the Parbatya Chattagam Jana Sanghati Samiti

(PCJSS), and Bengalis, who are hired collaborators, who engage in toll collection (i.e., extorting).

19. (C) Over tea, Charge met the "Equal Rights Movement" composed mostly of Bengalis who complain that the 1997 Accords have been unfair to them. The leader, Belayet Hossain Bhuiyan, is the younger brother of Wadud Bhuiyan and told Charge that their group includes all religions, and peoples and its purpose is "consciousness raising." The younger Bhuiyan complained that:
--the insurgents harass Bengalis who legally moved to the Hill Tracts;
--the Army continues to find arms hidden by the tribals;
--the tribals have privileges the Bengalis do not have;
--the Land Commission is dominated by tribal people and is thus unfair;
--the Bengalis who moved to Army protected "cluster villages" have had their unoccupied land stolen by tribals;
--Bengalis remain 85 percent illiterate while tribals get preferred access to education;
--UNDP never helps Bengalis only the tribals; and
--UNDP is secretive about their activities in the Hill Tracts.

110. (C) Bhuiyan blamed tribal insurgents for continued reports of violence in the Hill Tracts and while Bengalis may have done acts of retribution, "it is in the name of justice as only tribals get economic benefits." He said that before the Army arrived, 30,000 Bengalis had been killed, but while the Army is still needed, they are doing more for the tribals than they do for the Bengalis.

111. (C) Later that day, Charge met with the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) leaders Animish Chakma, Pradipan Khisha, and others. Chakma and his followers said that the CHT Development Board funds the Army, and that while their group has offered to work with Shantu Larma and his organization, the Parbatya Chattagam Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS), Chakma said that Shantu Larma believes that his organization is "the only one in the district."

112. (SBU) While in the Hill Tracts, Charge participated in the distribution of over 1,000 backpack school bags to children at three schools, with ages ranging from 6 to 16. The school bags, came complete with notebooks, paper, pens and pencils, a Bangla-English dictionary, and a picture book called "America 24/7" depicting the diversity of life in America. Charge spoke to the students about similarities and differences of Bangladeshis and Americans, and took questions.

113. (SBU) Examples of the school children's questions are:

--Do tribal people in the United States have equal rights/special rights?
--Are Native Americans permitted to have their own language in their schools?
--Do American schools offer special incentives to girl students?
--Do average Americans feel comfortable with Muslims around?
--What rights do children have in America?

114. (C) On August 24, Charge met with CHT Regional Council members and its Chairman, Shantu Larma. Larma explained that military rule leaves him and the Regional Council with "no power to function." He said that while additional laws need to be passed in Parliament, some laws remained "completely un-implemented." He called for the government to withdraw the military administration and let the Hill District Councils and Regional Councils do their jobs, reduce the numbers of unneeded Army troops and permanent camps, and withdraw the 500 temporary Army camps as specified in the Accords. He charged that the UPDF is "organized by the government" whose main duty is to be an obstacle to implementation of the 1997 CHT Accords, that they have links to the Army and the slaying of 37 PCJSS supporters over the years, and that the UPDF is "not a political organization." Having signed the 1997 CHT Accords, he said "I have a special responsibility" to ensure the government honors their agreement. He claimed that as a way forward, there are those in the cabinet who support more implementation of the accords but that a "policy maker" does not support the Accords. He said that the international community needs to pressure the government and ask for return to civil authority.

115. (C) Charge met journalists in Khagrachari and Rangamati Districts. The journalists complained about lack of access to UNDP, and said that since the money is from the United States, they should have spent the money evenly between Bengalis and tribals but have spent the money only on tribals, that the accords are 85 percent implemented, but tribal groups are able to pressure the government by going to foreign diplomats, such as those of Canada and Australia, and that journalists are constantly under threat by both Army and the tribals.

116. (C) Charge met with officials from UNDP in their Rangamati offices. They said that starting with no NGOS in 1997, they now have 19 NGOs, such as Action Aid, MSF, and

World Vision, operating in the Hill Tracts. Progress continues, they said, citing a recent EU agreement signed in August that would create, among other things, a mobile reproduction health clinic for women in the remotest areas of the CHT. The officials defended their programs, saying that while it is true 80 percent of the programs have gone to tribal people, these are programs operating in the remotest areas which have had no government assistance at all.

CHAMMAS